



Supporting vulnerable students and their families during the Covid-19 crisis

30/04/2020

Dear Principal/School Leader,

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) work closely to ensure that the provisions of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 are implemented and that all children are supported to fully engage in education to achieve their full potential.

At the outset, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and TESS want to acknowledge that the spread of Covid-19 has placed immense challenges and stresses on all service providers and families across Ireland. We know that schools right across the country have responded by setting up a range of innovative interventions and approaches to support the continuity of learning for students. We also know that schools are actively engaged in doing everything they can to safeguard the welfare of students and families in their school community.

We want to acknowledge the significant challenges faced by schools in ensuring the continuity of education for children and young people and the response from schools in meeting these challenges. Schools have had to be mindful of the circumstances in which children are endeavouring to continue their learning and we ask that you continue to be cognisant of these circumstances when considering the assignment of school work, particularly children facing difficult learning environments, which have been exacerbated by the current crisis. We are also aware that the Department of Education and Skills has provided guidance in relation to the provision of such educational supports to vulnerable children which will assist in this regard.

However, we are very conscious that schools also play a significant role in relation to protecting and safeguarding the most vulnerable and at risk students and their families. Schools are uniquely placed as principals, teachers and the wider school staff have a knowledge and understanding of all their students' needs and individual circumstances.

We are acutely aware that some of the children in your school are very vulnerable, and their ongoing welfare and protection is, in part, dependent on the fact that they are visible to you, their teachers and school leaders. Where HSCL coordinators and SCP personnel are available, they can also play a vital role in this regard.

Throughout the school year teachers have concerns about some of their pupils and have ongoing contact with their social work colleagues in Tusla, including those children who have safety plans and are on the Child Protection Notification System. As you know, teachers play a key role in children's safety and they, are often the first to notice a change in behaviour, or a school absence, indeed a teacher might well be the significant adult in whom the child confides. In the current situation, these children have become invisible to this safety network.

Your vital role regarding these children continues even though school buildings are now closed. You may be aware from online or telephone contact with a family that their situation is very stressful, or indeed a lack of contact may be the cause of concern. Your ongoing contact with Tusla social workers is vital in helping them prioritise children in greatest need and those that may need a visit or other intervention. You might be asked to take part in a case conference (on line or by phone), to provide some background about a child or in some other way to contribute to ensuring the child is safe and well.

Some teachers are engaged with interagency safety plans or child protection plans for individual children at ongoing risk of significant harm. Such teachers should confirm with the school principal that they and the school Designated Liaison Person (DLP) have the child's social worker's contact details and are available to be contacted if necessary. It is important for schools to be aware that child protection social workers are continuing to work during this crisis period.

Where risks exist and has a safety/child protection plan is in place, it may be a challenging for the child to attend classes online or complete work from home. We ask that teachers would endeavour to engage as best as they can with these children. Where teachers cannot make contact with the child or their parent/ guardian, they should notify the child's social worker, in accordance with the schools reporting procedures of their attempts to do so, including the number of failed contacts over a specific period of time. If teachers have any concerns arising as a result of contact via digital or other remote means, they should relay this information to the child's social worker following the usual protocols.

Tusla continues to provide key services across core areas that support children and families at risk during COVID-19, including child protection and emergency out of hours services.

Details of all local social work offices are available at: <https://www.tusla.ie/services/child-protection-welfare/contact-a-social-worker/>.

We would request that schools give a particular focus to personnel completing relevant training such as the Children First eLearning Programme, particularly where they will be in direct contact with households and communities during this time. The online training programme is available on the Tusla website at <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/children-first-e-learning-programme/>

DEIS schools will have School Completion Programme (SCP) and Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) staff to provide appropriate supports and signpost families to other community services where necessary. It is crucial in the current context that schools continue to make referrals if a teacher/ HSCL Coordinator or SCP worker is concerned that a child protection/welfare concerns exists, and that they remain contactable by phone to talk to social workers in relation to child protection/welfare concerns.

In particular, we request that all schools have mechanisms in place to engage with those students and families known to be at risk during this time of crisis. If you have not already done so, please check in with all families that you know to be vulnerable to:

- a) check on their welfare;
- b) see if the school can help in any way and
- c) let the family/young person know that the school is there to support them in any way possible.

We also recommend reaching out to friends of difficult to contact students, who may be able to assist in getting a message to these students and connecting them with school personnel.

It is important that all relevant in-school and community-based responses are considered to maximise engagement and support for vulnerable students. Key amongst these are those supports provided by Tusla Education Support Services. These comprise of supports provided under the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme; the School Completion Programme (SCP); and also the statutory service of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs). EWOs are in place nationwide and play a pivotal role in engaging with schools and in supporting the educational welfare of students referred to the service. Where students are engaged with an EWO s/he can support these students to participate in the learning opportunities provided by schools.

Further community based supports can be found through the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC), which are county-level committees that bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people. There are 27 CYPSCs areas across the country and a directory of services in your area can be found at the following link:

<https://www.cypsc.ie/your-county-cypsc.169.html>

We are asking every school principal and their teachers, along with others working in community organisations and statutory agencies, to continue to support at risk children in this time of crisis, by maintaining contact with their families and providing whatever supports the school can offer. We understand that this request is an additional ask of school leaders and staff but we believe that a coordinated and comprehensive checking system on vulnerable and at risk children can best be achieved through schools.

We thank you in anticipation of your support in this matter.

Kind Regards,

Conor Rowley,
Assistant Secretary General, DCYA

Noel Kelly,
Director, TESS